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2015-11-04

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Farhad, Lemar. "The Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, A Cautionary Tale For All Revolutionaries." (2015).

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/62214>

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# The Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917

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November 4,  
2015

## *A Cautionary Tale For All Revolutionaries*

Human society is continuously shaped by social, political, and technological developments. Some societies reject these developments and others embrace them. Normally, the rejection or acceptance is silent and smooth. At times, however, the process is violent and leads to conflict or revolution. According to Samuel Huntington, "a revolution is a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activity and policies." [1] The Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 were marred by ardent violence and political maneuvering. This article will analyze both revolutions, illustrating that the revolution of 1905 was both a precursor and cause of the 1917 revolution, while having its own precursors and causes.



Aided by brutal defeats and unprecedented loss of life in two wars, the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 were the collective backlash of the masses against the corrupt, incompetent, and uncaring autocracy of the Tsarist Regime which was unable and unwilling to change with the times. Moreover, the revolutions hardly yielded the type of productive and egalitarian change that masses called for. Thus, these revolutions serve as a cautionary tale for both governments and revolutionaries.

## The 1905 Revolution

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Incompetency and a lack of leadership led to the downfall of the Tsar.



The indirect causes of the 1905 Revolution laid in the social, political, agrarian, and industrial developments that marked the preceding century. Since the 1860s emancipated serfs had become “free” peasants, though they were still tied to the communal agricultural system called the *Mir*. [2] The *Mir* system was unjust and backward, causing the farmers great grief by requiring them to make installment

payments to the government, in addition to the heavy taxes, for the land distributed to them. The double burden often resulted in ill feelings towards the government.

Tsar Nicholas and his government of nobles were aware of the backward state of the Russian economy, and so they pushed for modernization. This led to rapid industrialization, which created a new urban proletariat class and snatched peasants from behind the plow to work at high-tech industrial factories. The conditions at the Russia factories were unbearably miserable and the workers were often unhappy with their squalid work environment. Since many had come to the cities to work in these factories, they had



become increasingly literate and aware of their plight. As a result, worker strikes and general discontent were commonplace. The workers, in a unitary effort, turned into a formidable force against both factory management and the government.[3] At times, the strikes were for political aims, and other times they were economic. Thus, the workers were following the traditions of the peasants, who throughout the Russian political landscape of the 1700s and 1800s often rebelled in violent ways.[4]

With both the urban industrial centers and the countryside embroiled in turmoil, Tsar Nicholas and his government looked to starting small wars in order to quell domestic discontent with the resultant patriotic fervor.[5] In 1904, Russia went to war with Japan over both countries' imperialistic aims in Manchuria. The Russians believed that the Japanese were beneath them, socially and culturally, and thus the Russians would have an easy win. As the result of the weak leadership of Tsar Nicholas II, Russia lost the war and suffered humiliation. Russian people everywhere felt this devastating humiliation and loss of life.

On Sunday, 9 January 1905, a peaceful protest was organized by Father Gapon to bring social welfare and economic concerns to the attention of the tsar.[6] As Palmer posits, the crowds chanted, "God save the tsar." [7] The Tsar was absent, and the panicking troops shot and killed several hundred protesters. The day was called Bloody Sunday; the Revolution had begun.[8] Constant protesting and striking caused the Tsar to declare the October Manifesto. In it, he agreed to a new constitution and pledged a nationally elected parliament, which was called the Duma.

Although this revolution brought no real change to the social, economic, and political landscape of Russia, the Revolution of 1905 set the stage for the revolutions of 1917. The commoners were still frustrated, and now the average commoner saw the results of what could happen when they take to the streets *en masse*. The revolution also exposed a weak and inept Tsar who was out of the touch with the masses, and lacked any vision for bringing change to Russia. The immediate causes of the 1905 revolution were failed state-level leadership and policy, inflation poverty, hunger, Russo-Japanese War, the rise of reformer and revolutionary groups, and Bloody Sunday. The revolution paved the way for political parties and ideas to incubate. During this incubation, revolutionaries like Lenin and Stalin, with dangerous ideas, were now free to express them and see them come to fruition.

## The 1917 Revolutions

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There were many precursors for the 1917 revolutions, which started in February and ended in October. Failed tsarist economic policies that caused food shortages, general disenchantment with the tsarist autocracy, a burgeoning and increasingly radical and revolutionary proletariat and intellectual class, proliferation of revolutionary journals and newspapers that advocated violent regime overthrow, hyper-inflation, and murderous peasant uprisings in the countryside are among the major precursors of the first phase.

Tensions present since 1905 had rendered the Russian political landscape fragile and



The Russian army joins the revolution.

violent. By the end of 1916, Russia was reeling from its involvement in World War I. The

With the Tsar away, anger and hunger increased the overall discontent felt and expressed towards the government. The citizens began striking. Unlike 1905, the people were no longer chanting support for the Tsar. This time they were shouting, "Down with the tsar." [13] The soldiers socially identified with the protesters and, instead of firing on the crowds, they stood by or joined them. The Tsar, travelling back from the war front, had lost control of his armed forces. According to Palmer, "The Army, fatefully, was taking the side of the revolution." [14] The Tsar's advisors advised abdication. Nicolas, an arrogant, inept man who suffered from an acute want of leadership and decision making, did not know what to do. Finally, he abdicated on March 17, 1917. In this tragic way, the Russian Republic was born. [15]

In April 1917, the dual power of the Provisional Government and the Soviet of Petrograd was established; it ended in October of 1917, with the rapid, and violent takeover of all political power by the Bolsheviks. Comprised of Tsarist intelligentsia and eventually headed by Kerensky, the Provisional Government was indecisive and ineffective. World War I was still raging and the food shortages continued. The Kerensky government lacked the ability to unify the masses and act as a symbol of leadership and unity. Russian commoners saw them as remnants of Tsarist rule. The Bolsheviks were rising in power and, in alliance with

the proletarian and peasant classes; they had grown increasingly hostile towards the Kerensky Government.[16] During this time, Lenin was also rising as an emerging political power. In the summer of 1917, Lenin, through fate and chance, became the political figurehead of the Bolsheviks. His slogan was simple, "Peace, Land, Bread,"[17] and it coalesced with the Bolshevik narrative. By 25 October 1917, the Kerensky Government was weakened to the level where it could no longer defend itself. On 6–7 November, the Bolsheviks took control of Petrograd's lifelines and stormed the Winter Palace. Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky now led the Russian Republic.

## Change

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Revolution is intended to bring change. That change occurs socially, politically, and economically. In every revolution there are winners and losers. In 1905, the aristocracy, though wounded, still came out to be a winner. The losers were the peasantry and the proletariat. Political change came in the form of the Duma, but in many ways, though Russia was slightly freer socially, change was not all encompassing. The revolutions of 1917 brought about radical changes that still affect Russia. Initially, the aristocracy and the capitalists emerged as the biggest losers, while for a brief period the proletariat and peasantry seemed to be victorious. "War Communism," collectivization, mass arrests, and the New Economic Plan (NEP) ensured that peasant and proletarian victories were short lived.

The major difference between the two revolutions was the extent of their respective impacts. While the effects of the 1905 Revolution were limited to Russia, the 1917 revolutions changed the entire world, primarily for the worse. Revolutionary regimes sprung up in Eastern Europe and in post-colonial Asia, Africa, and Latin America, killing people, and destroying economies and lives. This madness ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break up of the Soviet Union.

The revolutions illustrate the power of ideas and social narratives. When compared and contrasted, the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 depict what happens when state leadership is out touch with the masses it is chartered to govern; today this applies directly to the governments of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The revolution of 1905 serves as a case study and warning for government elites in leadership and policy making positions to embrace change gracefully. Conversely, the revolutions of 1917 serves as a case study and warning for revolutionaries, as the old saying goes, "Be careful what you wish for."

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## Notes:

[1] Samuel Huntington, *Revolution, "Theoretical, Comparative, & Historical Studies,"* edited by Jack A. Goldstone, 2nd edition. (New York: 2002), 38.

[2] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *the Russian Revolution*, 3rd ed. (New York: 2008), 15

[3] Fitzpatrick, "Russian Revolution," 17.

[4] Fitzpatrick, "Russian Revolution," 20.

[5] Fitzpatrick, "Russian Revolution," 21.

[6] Fitzpatrick, "Russian Revolution," 32.

[7] Fitzpatrick, "Russian Revolution," 33.

[8] R.R. Palmer and Joel Colton and Lloyd Kramer, *History of the Modern World*, 10th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill), 729.

[9] *Ibid.*, 729

[10] Palmer and Colton and Kramer, "Modern World," 733.

[11] Fitzpatrick, "Russian Revolution," 38.

[12] Palmer and Colton and Kramer, "Modern World," 735.

[13] Palmer and Colton and Kramer, "Modern World," 735.

[14] Palmer and Colton and Kramer, "Modern World," 735.

[15] Palmer and Colton and Kramer, "Modern World," 737.

[16] Palmer and Colton and Kramer, "Modern World," 737.